How a rational organization responds to an increasingly mediatized world: A case study of Vietnam's Central Propaganda and Training Commission and social media

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Abstract

With 64 million accounts, Vietnam ranked seventh in the world in terms of Facebook users, hence, how to control the risks and harness the opportunities of social media is one of the questions that occupy the Vietnamese elites. One of the organizations that is in the forefront of dealing with these issues is the Communist Party of Vietnam's Central Propaganda and Training Commission (CPTC), which is tasked with "maintaining the integrity and consistency" in the narrative of Vietnamese media. Employing the theory of Richard Scott (1998) on organizations as rational systems and that of Hoskins and Loughlin on mediatization (2010), this paper aims to provide an account of how the CPTC has rationally changed and adapted since the rise of social media. Through a literature review, this study finds that to deal with problems raised by social media, the CPTC has (1) since 2012 created their own social media pages to disseminate information and viewpoints that counter the "misinformation" and "misguided opinions"; (2) developed specific discourses to guide relevant discussions; (3) included "policy communication" and "media crisis management" into their agenda. Further research must be done to determine how effective these changes are in containing the risks without losing the opportunities of social media. The CPTC's actions nonetheless provide a useful lesson for how organizations could handle the increasingly mediatized world.

Keywords: Social media, Vietnam's Central Propaganda and Training Commission, organizations as rational systems

Introduction

The new media environment in Vietnam

In terms of sheer numbers, Vietnam is a Facebook nation. According to the most recent report done by We Are Social on social media in Vietnam, there are 64 million (67% of Vietnam's population) accounts. For social media in general, the country has 46 million social media users (48% of the population), of which, 41 million use mobile devices to access social media. On average, Vietnamese people spend 2 hours, 39 minutes on social media daily (Lao Dong Infographic, 2018). And in a survey done by the Pew Research Center, 48% of Vietnamese people get daily news from social media (Minh-Nga, 2018).

It is then not surprising that social media has shaped the media environment in Vietnam, forcing people, organizations, and institutions in the country struggle to keep up. People have use different phrases to describe this phenomenon, for example, “ambient news reporting” or “Internet as the foundation of Vietnamese civil society” (Nguyen & Vuong, 2016). Nonetheless, the fact remains that there have been many successful protests that took place in social media (Dien-Luong, 2017; Vi-Tran, 2018). The exceptional case is the protest against the plan of building a cable car into the Son Doong Cave, known as the world’s largest cave; the Vietnamese netizens launched an online petition called “Save Son Doong.” The petition attracted thousands of signatures and was successful in pressurizing the provincial authority to shelve the cable car plan (Dien-Luong, 2017). Here, social media is an ally in the political activism of Vietnamese. However, not all is well with this new platform. In a recent famous case concerning fake news, before a riot often characterized by the media as anti-China, there was [a Facebook post](#) protesting a law on special economic zones in that is about to be passed by the National Assembly. The post was about how China could use this new law to take over Vietnam thus framing this law as "selling out" the country to China.

The problem is that none of that is true (Panda & Parameswaran, 2018) and it is from a fake account of a famous journalist in Vietnam Television, the biggest state-owned media corporation in the country (Chu-Anh, 2018). This journalist has made many public statements to disown the account, yet, this fake post was shared by more than 326,000 people and reacted to by more than 178,000 people. This controversial law has sparked violent protests, eventually, push the National Assembly to approve delaying the decision on the bill. The Chairwoman of the National Assembly, Mrs. Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan expressed her concerns: "Regrettably, the people have not appropriately understood the substance of this issue, and misunderstanding has led to extreme acts." (Finney, 2018). It is fair to say social media plays a crucial role in this misunderstanding.

The Central Propaganda and Training Commission: its role and challenges

In the forefront of the battle to deal with the risks posed by social media is the Communist Party of Vietnam’s Central Propaganda and Training Commission (CPTC). The organization is tasked with the mission to “advise the Party about building the Party’s ideologies and politics, on communicating the viewpoints and policies of the Party in newspapers, publications, culture, arts, science and technology, education and training” (CPV, 2018).

As maintaining the control of the narrative in the new media is vital to the function and survival of the regime, the CPTC, directly and indirectly, supervises the operation of about 700 newspapers, print and online and all other forms of the media: textbooks, movies, TV series, theaters, etc. To understand the pivotal role of CPTC in Vietnam, it is worth referring to China's Central Propaganda Department. Liu Zhonghe, the former deputy-director of this department, said the leadership of the head of the propaganda department in China is comparable to that of the Secretary of Defense in the United States, it is the matter of national security and stability

(McGregor, 2010). In the example of the riot discussed above, Vietnam's CPTC is struggling to fulfill this vital role in the new media environment profoundly shaped by social media.

In a recent national conference, Mr. Vo Van Thuong, the head of CPTC, commented on the importance for the propaganda work to keep up with the changes with social media: "Nowadays, it is the early-bird newspaper, not the major one, that will triumph." (Minh-Nga, 2018). He recognized that as news is often breaking in social media and Vietnamese people increasingly get news from this platform, the CPTC's slow pace in verifying and reacting to the commotion in social media will impede the efficiency of the organization's work.

Research question

As discussed above, the new media environment in Vietnam is heavily shaped by social media, and already there are many challenges to the CPTC, the organization in charge of maintaining the control of the narrative in the media in Vietnam. Hence, this study seeks to answer the following question (RQ): "In a new media environment characterized by more connectivity, more speed, and greater uncertainty, how does the CPTC respond?"

A conceptual and theoretical framework

It is crucial to break down the RQ by putting it in a conceptual and theoretical framework. The conceptual framework is summed up in Figure 1, in which, the CPTC working toward its goals under the influences of foreign actors and domestic politics, to which, the organization must provide appropriate responses. And all players are operating under a new media environment.

It is essential to clarify that because Vietnam does not reinforce the great firewall, people in Vietnam can still access to multiple foreign-based media outlets in the Vietnamese language that are known for their anti-state and anti-Communist propaganda. And secondly, in terms of the size of the market, with merely 95.5 million people and limited recourses, it is not likely that Vietnam can create their social media platforms like Weibo or Wechat. Without the great firewall and the complete control of social media like China, the CPTC is facing multiple challenges to control the narrative that is constantly challenged by the foreign actors. For domestic actors, social media can be a viable platform for them to spread false information and rumors that could harm the CPTC's missions. Similar to China, Vietnam is also afraid of the spread of misinformation and rumors in social media (Xiao, 2013; Snell & Xiao, 2007; Hai-Bang, 2017). Under the challenges from multiple fronts, how has the CPTC responded?

Figure 1: The conceptual framework. In the new media environment shaped by social media, the CPTC, in fulfilling its role, it must provide adequate responses to foreign actors and domestic politics.

In this conceptual framework, the RQ question can be addressed by employing two theories: the theory of organizations as rational systems by Richard Scott (2002) and the theory of mediatization by Hjarvard (2008). Scott (2002) writes:

“From the rational system perspective, organizations are instruments designed to attain specified goals. How blunt or fine an instrument they are depends on many factors that are summarized by the concept of rationality of structure.” (Scott, 2002, p.33).

In the case of the CPTC, the CPTC’s goal from the start is to control the media to communicate effectively the Communist Party’s viewpoints and policies. Hence, the RQ is could be rephrased as, if viewed as a rational system, how has the CPTC changed to achieve its goals?

As for mediatization, Hjarvard (2008) writes:

“Mediatization refers to a more long-lasting process, whereby social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of media’s influence.” (Hjarvard, 2008, p.114).

This concept of mediatization is later picked up by Hoskins and O’Loughlin (2010) to illuminate their account of the how war is mediatized, or how war-related institutions have changed because of the changes that take places in the new media ecology: more speed, more connectivity, more uncertainty. Though Vietnam is not at war, the language the media use still reflected the war mindset; for example, the mainstream media is filled with words such as "hostile forces," "revolutionary ethics," "color revolution", etc., which will be explained later. The CPTC is arguably one of the leading organizations behind this discourse. As the new media

environment makes it possible for foreign actors and even domestic political actors to weaponize social media to challenge the established narrative, how has the CPTC responded to this challenge organizationally?

Analysis

How the CPTC go on offense

The first significant response of the CPTC in the face of the challenges of social media is to set up their own social media pages; there is an official page that posts more critical news and viewpoints (Figure 2) and there are also several pages and accounts of local branches. In an article titled "Struggle against the misguided opinions in the social media," the staffs of a local branch of the CPTC describe their process of engaging with some trending viewpoints or news that go against the authorized mainstream viewpoints (Thuc-Han, 2018).

Figure 2: The Facebook page of the CPTC. The page has only about 3,000 followers.

On the one hand, the staffs, themselves, will engage with their views by posting their counter-arguments. On the other, they will ask for support from other government organizations such as the Women's Association, the Youth's Association, etc. Each will regularly update and post about the mainstream and authorized viewpoints, connecting them to the traditional values of the Vietnamese society and the vision of the society. They call this method "diversified propaganda." This local branch of the CPTC has publicized their model of engaging with social media. The model has two phrases: Phrase 1 is about seeking approval and planning for the engagement (or the battle), and Phase 2 is about execution and later reflection on the lessons learned from it. This model is likely to be adopted by other CPTC's local branches.

In this approach, the CPTC shows the willingness to adopt a new feature in its organizational structures. And how it carries out this mini organizational reform is entirely rational as it systematically goes through the cycle of planning, executing, reflecting, re-planning, and promoting what works for its local divisions.

How the CPTC develop their terminologies

Confronting with the new problems raised by social media, the CPTC has tried to come up with new terminologies so that it could name issues and be more effective in guiding the mainstream media in Vietnam. Harris and Nawaz (2015) defined the Voldemort problem: the problem when people all know about a problem, but having no name to call it similar to everyone in Harry Potter's world knowing about Voldemort but afraid of calling him by name. Essentially, creating new terminologies of CPTC is to avoid this Voldemort problem.

There has been a history of people using terminologies that on the surface seems quite paranoid. For example, "hostile forces" are any groups plotting against the regime; "peaceful evolution" is about how the hostile forces are plotting against the regime using peaceful means and events (Van Oudenaren, 2015; Vu, 2018). These words seem to be useful in the case of violent riot, the Vietnamese state has used them to warn the people against falling for the enticement and persuasion of the enemies of the state, people who have a motive to overthrow the regime and would like to use the strength of the people, yet, they might not have the interests of the people at heart (Duc-Trong, 2018).

"Self-evolution" and "self-transformation" are two recent terms; they are about people losing faith in and turning on the regime as they can access to a freer flow of information (Hoang, 2018). In the age of social media, these terms have become prominent in the CPTC and by extension, the mainstream media's discussion on important issues such as political corruptions or mismanagement of perception on government policies and visions. These terms are used together with phrases such as "revolutionary ethics," which denote the kind of ideals and ethics that the revolutionary founders of the modern Vietnamese state uphold, to bring contrast.

The creation of the new terminologies and the popularization of these terms in the mainstream media can be viewed as a rational response of the CPTC to the increasingly mediatized world. One can argue that these terms encourage self-censorship and self-thought-police, however, they have presented an alternative framework for the CPTC to address the problems confronting Vietnam without resorting to the framework of democracy and human rights that is dominant in Western media (Brooten, 2011& 2015). Moreover, these terms can point the audiences away from the propaganda on the anti-state sites and the raw news materials on social media.

How policy communication and media crisis management are included in CPTC's agenda

Seeing the importance of perception management in ensuring the policies and visions of the state in its most positive lights can come to the people, the CPTC has gone beyond

organizing its social media sites and creating terminologies. It has taken concrete steps to include policy communication and media crisis management in its agenda.

In recent years, the CPTC frequently organizes or takes part in seminars and conferences related to these issues (Khanh-Vy, 2017; Tam-Thanh, 2017). In most of the conferences, the CPTC invited foreign scholars and organizations who have experienced with policy communication and media crisis management to learn from them. There have already been discussions to rethinking the laws on the protocols of public announcements of government offices. Here, the CPTC recognized the needs to react quickly to the media situation (Dien-Luong, 2017b). Hence, the organization facilitates discussions that propose the legal changes that allow the media to get information from the government faster. Moreover, it has also promoted training for government officials on mass media communication and interaction with the media. In an attempt to actively shape public opinions, the CPTC has started to discuss the use of “public opinion shapers” (Dien-Luong, 2017).

Conclusion & Discussion

In conclusion, the paper has presented an account of the organizational changes that take places in the Central Propaganda and Training Commission it attempts to respond to the challenges from social media. The CPTC has three major responses: (1) to create their own social media websites to disseminate the viewpoints and policies of the state, at the same time, to engage with misinformation and misguided opinions online; (2) to create and propagate new terminologies that help guide relevant discourses related to the problems raised by social media; (3) to advance the priority of policy communication and media crisis management in their official agenda. Given the qualitative nature of this article, the results here serve, at their best, to raise questions and generate testable hypothesis about the efficacy of these tactics and the new role of organization tasked with perception management in an increasing mediatized environment. To achieve that goal, future studies in this area can be benefited from a more data-driven approach; for instance, a research on populist communication of U.S. president Donald Trump (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018), a study on Zika conspiracy (Klofstad, Uscinski, Connolly & West, 2019), or a study on how Vietnamese government manage anti-China nationalism in the media (Bui, 2017). With advanced methods such as statistically analysis using powerful computational technique such as Bayesian multilevel modeling (Vuong & La, 2019; La & Vuong, 2019) or text mining technique (Bui, 2017) have been made easily accessible in the age of Industry 4.0 (Vuong, 2019), one can expect there will be a quantitative revolution to this area of media study. A smart data-driven method combined with a solid qualitative framework is the bedrock for any successful scientific investigation, which can inform policy and will bring long-term positive effects for society (Vuong, 2018).

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